

## LEGENDS OF DANTE'S INQUISITORIAL INVESTIGATION AND THEIR HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

My paper at the Italian Academy's Fellows' Seminar focused on legends describing an episode in the life of Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), the famous Florentine poet. These, usually short, anecdotal stories begin to appear in manuscripts around the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. They narrate how Dante was supposedly accused of heresy by a member of the clergy. In some versions this person is an inquisitor, and in others a friar or even the pope himself. The story continues to describe how Dante managed to evade this accusation and to vindicate himself by writing a vernacular poem that not only proved beyond doubt the orthodoxy of his faith, but also established Dante's status as a paragon of lay-vernacular piety. All versions of this legend are followed by the poem Dante allegedly wrote as his doctrinal defense - a pseudo-Dantean text aptly titled *Credo di Dante*, whose real author was Antonio Beccari da Ferrara (1315-c.1373).

In the seminar I presented all the versions of this legend which I collected and transcribed for the first time from Italian manuscripts. My paper argued that although there is currently no supporting evidence that Dante was persecuted in life, this apparently fantastic tale is not completely unrelated to the historical events that occurred after the poet's death. Presenting the historical details of Dante's early persecution, and specifically the attempt of Cardinal-Legate Bertrand du Poujet (c. 1280-1352) to burn Dante's bones in Bologna in 1329, I suggested the narrative and vocabulary of these legends echoes in many places the details of this affair, and Boccaccio's account of it in his *Trattatello in Laude di Dante* (1357-62). The failed posthumous attempt on Dante's good name and orthodoxy, became in later legend a real attempt to send the living Dante to the pyre as a heretic.

As my paper explained, in the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, after Dante's death, the *Sommo Poeta's* orthodoxy was under scrutiny. Direct attacks by ecclesiastics both on Dante's work and on Dante's person were not unheard of. As the 14<sup>th</sup> century progressed, the fortunes of Dante shifted. The reasons for this positive shift are the subject matter of the monograph I am currently working on. By the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, Dante was not only tolerated by ecclesiastics, but was actually being quoted in sermons, lectured on by Dominican and Franciscan preachers as a type of religiously sanctioned text, and painted on the walls of churches.

This tale of the supposed clash between the living Dante and the church authorities was, as my paper further argued, a literary invention created at a point in time when Dante's religious reception was on the rise. Late 14<sup>th</sup> century and early 15<sup>th</sup> century devotees of Dante, who lived at a time Dante was already at the center of the religious consensus, needed an explanatory myth that would help them resolve the apparent disparity between the memory of Dante's early doctrinal persecution, and the spiritual status Dante has already attained in his later reception.

By describing Dante's early persecution in legend as an unjust ad hominem attack, fueled by the arrogance and fury of fanatic clergymen, or by describing it simply as an attack by a misdirected inquisitor, these legends were re-writing Dante's heterodox past and his troubled history with the church - doing so, they asserted that such early doctrinal attacks on Dante's work and person were not truly related in any way to his religious orthodoxy, but were possibly the offshoot of corrupt ecclesiastics or of the violent politics of the morally corrupt Avignonese

Papacy. Thus, the late devotees of Dante who wrote these legends propagated the idea that these attacks were in fact irrelevant to Dante's already well-established doctrinal-religious standing.

The study of these stories further demonstrates how Italians in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries constantly re-evaluated the cultural and intellectual changes around them and re-interpreted Dante's image in light of these changes, keeping Dante's positive perception as a religious figure afloat, and, in some cases, re-imagining the past so as to validate their enduring appreciation of the *divino poeta*.